

The street where God did not strike down Feigenbaum



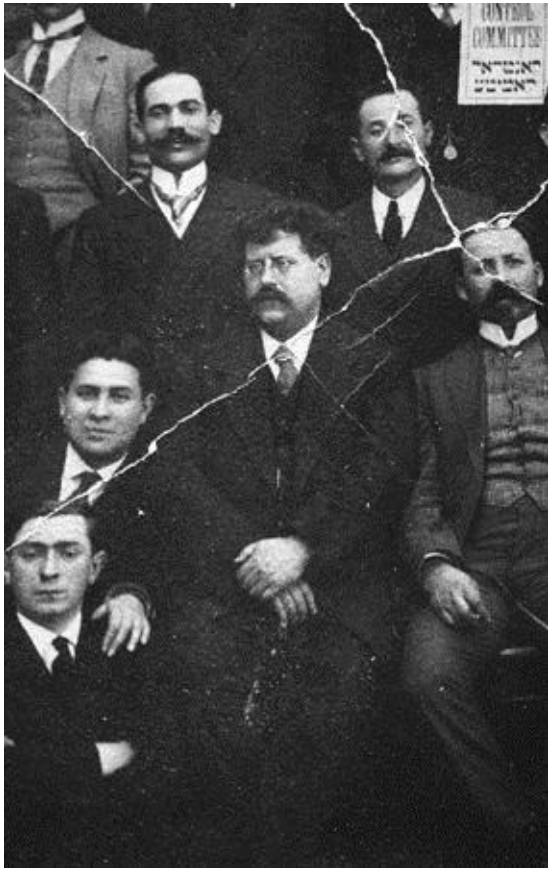
A short account of anarchist connections to Hanbury Street in the East End of London.

The article *A Rose By Any Other Name* ([here at libcom](#)) dealt with Rose Street (later Manette Street) in central London and its continuing links with anarchism. We will head further East to Darkest London, the Abyss of Jack London, to find two other streets with continuing association with the anarchist movement.

Hanbury Street in Spitalfields had become densely populated by the 1880s with the wave of Jewish emigration from the Russian Empire. As a result of pogroms and poverty many Jews moved into the area, and unscrupulous landlords rented out heavily overcrowded property, whilst equally unscrupulous employers housed their workers in over-crowded and unhealthy workshops in the neighbourhood.

An anarchist movement began to grow and formed groups in different parts of this section of Tower Hamlets. From 1892 these groups came together for Friday evening meetings at the Sugar Loaf pub, at 187 Hanbury Street, at its eastern end. The pub had a large hall behind its bar, and anarchists, many of whom were clothing workers began to congregate there.

A scaremongering article in the *Evening Standard* (Oct 5th 1894) wrote about these anarchists at the Sugar Loaf: *"who get up the weekly discussions that tempt poor flies into the trap. Too lazy to work, they find in the mischievous propaganda they spread a capital means of bringing grist to their own particular mills."*



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It was here that the German anarchist Rudolf Rocker, then exploring the East End with his comrade Otto Schrieber in 1895, came on a visit. Rocker then took the decision to move into the area and work with the Jewish anarchist movement there. The first lecture he gave at the Sugar Loaf was *The roles of Karl Marx and Ferdinand Lassalle within the workers'*

movement on October 8th, 1895.

The anarchist Avrom Frumkin described the Sugar Loaf as the centre of the Jewish anarchist movement, and that the weekly meetings bore an international character, with most of the lectures given by Iakov Kaplan (bio here at libcom). The audiences built up to at least a hundred at every meeting. Many who visited started an association with the movement that lasted a lifetime, like Millie Sabel and Sam Dreen. Meetings at the Sugar Loaf continued to 1906.

Further west up Hanbury Street at number 71 was a bookshop and newsagent run by an anarchist couple, the Rudermans, both born around 1865-6 in the Russian Empire. Baruch Ruderman, known sometimes as Barnett Ruderman in British newspaper reports and censuses, had been a student at the Yeshiva (Talmudic school) at Volozhin, in what was then Lithuania and is now Belarus. It was the most prestigious Yeshiva within the Russian Empire.

After some of his fellow students introduced him to secular studies and to Russian and German books, he had “severe clashes with his fanatically religious parents he broke with Judaism. He arrived in London at the end of winter 1882 (other sources say 1884) and two years later moved to socialism. He was a pioneer of the Jewish workers movement in London and one of the founders of

the *Arbeter Frait Club*. Ruderman branched out from bookselling to publishing in the following years, being the first to publish radical books in Yiddish in England. Among these were several additions of the writings of the anarchist poet David Edelstadt (1892, 1900 and then 1911) as well as works by Gorky, many of these publications appearing under the imprint of *Rudermans Folks Bibliyothek*.

As Rocker wrote: “*Much of our literature went into Russia through the connections which one of our comrades, Ruderman, who kept a bookshop and newsagent's in Hanbury Street, had with the famous Yiddish publishing house Kletzkin in Vilna.*” He published his memoirs of the movement in the New York anarchist paper *Di Fraye Arbeter Shtime* from 1925 to 1926 in serialised form. He wrote articles, sometimes under the name of Ben Eliezer, in *Der Idisher Zhurnal* (from 1901) *Arbeter Fraynt*, and *Di Tsayt* (from 1907). In 1902-1903 he co-edited the journal *Der Vanderer*. The Rudermans stocked *Der Arbeter Frait* and *Freedom* at their shop. When Special Branch, under the heinous Inspector Melville, and at the bidding of the Russian authorities, moved against the revolutionary Burtsev, the shop in Hanbury Street was one of the places they visited to buy Burtsev's paper. As a result Burtsev was indicted for incitement to murder the Tsar and got 18 months hard labour, with an associate receiving 2

months hard labour. The Russian authorities rewarded Melville with gifts of gold jewellery to his wife.

Baruch died in 1928 but Rose lived on until 1951. In an obituary that Mat Kavanagh wrote for *Freedom* on May 12th of that year, he noted that she had been involved in intense labour activity and had been a member of the Berners Street anarchist club. Kavanagh referred to the bookshop as “the rendezvous of foreign comrades, many of whom were helped by the Rudermans who “fed them and found them lodgings”. She was “never in the limelight” and organised the social side of the movement, involving herself in fundraising for *Arbeter Frait*.

“Those who knew her have many memories of her never-ending zeal for the cause of Anarchism and her many means of inspiring work for this movement that she served so well”. She spoke at a memorial meeting for David Nicholl, anarchist and editor of *Commonweal*, on 14th April, 1931 in Tottenham.

The young anarchist Willie Ruderman, (born 1898-1899), who was imprisoned at Winchester for refusing military service in 1916, appears to be their son.

Further on up the road at 22 Hanbury Street, is the Christ Church Hall, where Annie Besant spoke in support of the matchgirls during their strike of 1888, followed next year by Eleanor Marx for the striking tailors. It continued to be a meeting place for striking Jewish tailors in 1906 and 1912. *The Arbeter Fraint* Benjamin Feigenbaum, described by Fishman as a master of anti-religious satire, spoke there on the day of Yom Kippur in 1889 on 'Is There a God?' to a packed meeting. As Thomas Eyges, an eye witness, wrote : "He was of medium height with broad shoulders and gesticulated as he spoke". He shouted: " If there is a God and if he is Almighty as the clergy claims he is, I give him just two minutes' time to kill me on the spot, so that he may prove his existence!" Two minutes passed, the band struck up a revolutionary song and Feigenbaum exclaimed: "See! There is no God!" In addition the anarchist orator Iakov Kaplan spoke to a large and successful meeting here on What Do the Anarchists Want? on 23rd January 1897.

Before we leave Hanbury Street and head south towards Fieldgate Street, we should note that Hanbury Street was the launch-pad for a union of mantle makers built on anarchist lines in 1891 (*Arbeter Fraint*, 20th February). It numbered a membership of 240 but its existence was short lived.

Nick Heath

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Photograph: From Jewish Museum of London. Detail of Free Workers Circle meeting, 1912.

Rudolf Rocker in centre.: <http://www.jewishmuseum.org.uk/photographic-archive-new>